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September 27, 2026
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 21:23-32
Ezekiel 18:1-4,25-32
Psalm 25:1-9
Philippians 2:1-13

Let's spend some time this morning thinking about prayer. More specifically, the prayers that emerge when everything in your life is turned upside down. When life changes in the blink of an eye and everything you thought you knew suddenly changes direction.

I kept thinking about these kinds of upside moments and I wanted to say something hopeful for you. But I also thought of my own moments that ripped the rug out from under me and there were few words I wanted to hear. Advice wasn't a solace because advice, no matter how well-meaning or good, wasn't going to reverse the situation.

Somehow, I had to learn to move through it. And I knew no one could do it for me. And at times, that was such a lonely feeling. Because it was hard to find strength. It was hard to find the right answers. It was hard because we don't prepare for these kinds of moments. We don't have a toolbox of skills to whip out when life hits below the belt. We haven't been practicing a specific prayer for something we never imagined would happen.

But in those moments one thing is often the case...we know that we need help. We just might not know how to ask for it or where to turn. And frankly, it can be so humbling giving voice to the most broken part of yourself. When every word just gets stuck in your throat and your stomach is in knots. When it's easier to deny the pain than to speak it out loud.

What if God hears something he doesn't like? What if we have done something wrong? What if we feel shame or regret? What if we are angry at God for what we are going through?

I would like to think that prayer is our greatest comfort in times of adversity and pain. I would like to think that we always have the words to say, even if we can only whisper them. But I also know that prayer isn't always that straightforward. At times, it may leave us wondering if God hears our prayers or if prayer matters or if prayer works.

Prayer opens up a space within us that asks...can I trust that God is going to be there?

Our Psalm this morning lingers with this question.

Scholars believe that this Psalm was written by someone who was deeply troubled and longing for help. We don't know the circumstances of their pain, but we do know that they are ardently seeking God.

I imagine them coming to this prayer when they are at the depths of their upside moment, when the rug has been jerked out from under them and they are scrambling to make sense of

their life. Not knowing how to take one step forward without crumbling. And the words begin to stream out of them...

The first thing the Psalmist says is this...

O God, I lift up my soul. I put all of my trust in you. Don't let me be humiliated. Don't let my enemies hurt me. Please, oh please, God, hear my prayer.

Have you been there? Not knowing what to do. Not knowing where to turn. And the only response you can utter is to call out to God. *God...I need you. Please stop the hurting. I can't see a way forward and I have to trust that you can help me.*

I remember so many times when the only prayer I could utter was three words...**God, Help me.** And I would say this prayer over and over again. Through tears, through screams, through tired nights and long days. Those three words encompassed all that my heart could ask. And I am reminded as I read this Psalm that it is in calling out to God that our prayer is already perfect in whatever words we can cobble together.

It doesn't have to be eloquent or descriptive. God knows exactly what is on your heart. God knows exactly what you are going through. So just start there...with your desire for God.

Then the Psalmist clarifies his need. He gives himself over to God and says...God, I am ready to listen.

God, show me what you want me to do. Teach me a better way. Lead me out of this situation.

We don't say prayers without the expectation of God's Spirit moving among us. We say prayers because we hope, we believe (even if that belief is weak and uncertain at times). We say them because deep down, we want God to meet our need, to work in and through us, to show us a path of liberation and redemption, out of darkness and into light. Show us. Teach us. Lead us. And with that we begin to wait, to listen, to hear God's answer because we have readied our hearts and minds.

I was once staying at the Taizé community in France and had a conversation with one of the monastics, Brother Emmanuel, and he changed my entire perspective on prayer. He said...**prayer is not a magic wand.** And yet, we expect it to act in that way all the time. But prayer is not meant to be a singular path towards change. It is meant to build a relationship between us and God. A relationship where we work together to live more fully.

But that relationship requires so much vulnerability and trust and strength, doesn't it? It's not easy. And the Psalmist recognizes that. You even get the sense that he has some doubts. He expresses concern that he is worthy of God's care. And I love that he has such a beautiful moment of honesty and vulnerability. He takes a risk...he names how he is feeling.

God, I need your compassion and your love right now. Please forgive me and love me anyway.

The Psalmist names a deep longing to be known, to be understood, to be loved unconditionally. Believing that God's love is greater than anything he may have done or anything that has been done to him. You probably know exactly how that feels. In the moment that changed everything, in the moment that took every ounce of your joy and dreams...you name the need to be loved once again, to feel hope once again.

These words are so powerful and they remind us of the deep healing work of prayer. They remind us of the generous, life-giving love of God that will never leave us, no matter what.

And then as though his prayer has renewed his faith, the Psalmist affirms who he knows God to be...

God you are gracious and upright. You will guide me in doing what is right.

I love this last line because you see that the Psalmist has not only called out to God and named a need. His prayer has not only expressed doubts. It has opened up the opportunity for a new relationship with God. And with that opening the Psalmist takes a step towards healing what was broken.

I want to leave you with this beautiful definition of prayer by Franciscan theologian Ilia Delio...*"Prayer is the longing of the human heart for God....an intimate in-dwelling of God in our lives, the One who remains faithful in love even when the world around us may fall apart...Prayer is breathing with God."*¹

And sometimes just taking those breaths is the beginning of our trust that God hears every last word that we offer to him in the moment of our greatest need.

¹ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/opening-to-god-2022-02-18/>